

Required reading

Books About the Stasi

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Two years after German unification, the history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) has yet to be written. Books and articles on the Ministry for State Ministry for State Security (MfS), however, continued to roll off the presses in 1990 and 1991. One reason is the fascination with the Stasi. Also, the history of East Germany and the Stasi are so entwined that one cannot discuss the former without reference to the latter.

The StUG Deadline

But there is a more practical reason. Many of the Stasi books, including the ones under review, had to be published *before* 2 January 1992 and could not have been written after that date. That is when Germany's Stasi Documents Law (*Stasi-Unterlagen-Gesetz*, or *StUG*) went into effect, prohibiting private possession or use of MfS records. The only legal repository of such records is a commission appointed by the German government to control some 6 million files stored mainly in the former MfS headquarters in Berlin.

Researchers will have limited access to the Stasi files and no access to files on foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, or terrorism. These books are important, therefore, because they summarize most of what we will ever know about the MfS.

A Dominant Force

The Stasi was the preeminent factor in shaping—or deforming—the East German state. The Stasi controlled virtually every sphere of public and private life.

Das Ende eines Geheimdienstes Oder: Wie lebendig ist die Stasi? (The End of an Intelligence Service Or: How Active is the Stasi?). By Ann Worst. LinksDruck, Berlin; 1991; 283 pp.

Das Ministerium fuer Staatsicherheit Anatomie des Mielke-Imperium (The Ministry for State Security Anatomy of Mielke's Empire). By David Gill and Ulrich Schroeter. Rowohlt, Berlin; 1991; 527 pp.

Stasi intern Macht und Banalitaet (Inside the Stasi Power and Banality). Edited by the Leipzig Citizens Committee for Dismantling the MfS/AVNS. Forum Verlag, Leipzig; 1991; 375 pp.

Stasi und kein Ende Die Personen und Fakten (No End to the Stasi The Persons and Facts). By Manfred Schell and Werner Kalinka. Die Welt/ Ullstein Verlag, Bonn; 1990; 421 pp.

In eigenem Auftrag Bekanntnisse und Einsichten (On My Own Assignment Revelations and Insights). By Markus Wolf. Schneekluth, Munich; 1990; 366 pp.

Das unheimliche Erbe Die Spionage-abteilung der Stasi (The Sinister Legacy The Stasi Intelligence Department). By Rita Selmenay and Thilo Weichert. Forum Verlag, Leipzig; 1991; 269 pp.

Wolf's West-Spione: Ein Insider Report (Wolf's Western Agents: An Insider Report). By Peter Richter and Klaus Roesler. Elefanten Press, Berlin; 1992; 190 pp.

The Stasi also penetrated West Germany from top to bottom. The foreign intelligence service (HVA) under Markus Wolf had thousands of agents in government ministries, the security services, business and industry, the media, and the education system.

The MfS SIGINT directorate monitored tens of thousands—perhaps 40,000 to 60,000—of telephones and entered electronic data bases, including secure but unencrypted ones, using cellular “clone-phones” and charging the calls and computer time to Bonn. There were few private conversations and even fewer secrets in Bonn.

Frustrated Victims

Some Germans are calling for *Aufarbeitung* of the “sinister” Stasi legacy—a psychological term that means coming to terms with a troubled past. The StUG both helps and hinders that process. Stasi victims can see their 201 files, but they are otherwise restricted in seeking justice. As the books by Worst and Gill/Schroeter show, in the hectic days of 1989 and 1990 the MfS succeeded in destroying most agent files or at least making it difficult to identify agents.

Former Stasi officers hired on contract by the post-communist coalition government and deep-cover operatives infiltrated the citizens’ committees that seized the files. The activists tried to save and expose everything. The former Stasi officers, aided and abetted by the government, fought a rearguard action. They persuaded the citizens’ committees to destroy all computer tapes, diskettes, and platemens, the fastest and most direct way to search agents’ names. Then they selectively destroyed the most incriminating files and the manual index in the Central Archives, leaving behind mostly “victim” rather than “agent” files.

Thus the victims, even if they can identify their former tormentors, cannot “prove” anything. Moreover, in some cases the Stasi switched agents’ and victims’ files, thereby creating additional confusion and undermining confidence in the files’ reliability.

The StUG was a compromise between those who wanted to destroy the Stasi files and those who wanted to declare the MfS a criminal organization and prosecute everyone who worked for it. The German Government itself is ambivalent. It was compelled on moral grounds to grant Stasi victims access to their own files. It also wants to use the files, as the StUG permits, to vet former GDR citizens for public-service positions and security clearances, as well as give the security services access to information on intelligence, counterintelligence, and terrorism.

But Bonn opposes broad access to the files because of its continuing embarrassment over successful MfS/HVA operations in West Germany. Some editorial writers have used the Stasi revelations to raise broader questions about the need for security and intelligence services in the Cold War’s aftermath.

Planning Ahead

Worst and Schell/Kalinka show that State Security Minister Erich Mielke made contingency plans for a political collapse as early as 1986. He issued a “survival order” calling for measures to save files and deploy deep-cover officers in a kind of staybehind effort. HVA documents reprinted in the Selitrenny/Weichert book show that the HVA followed suit. In 1986 it began microfilming its archives, ostensibly for “historical reasons,” and it accelerated the storing of data on agents and foreign intelligence officers in an electronic counterintelligence data base in Moscow.

Miekle understood that Gorbachev’s rise implied the decline of the last Stalinist regime in East Europe. He also knew that East Berlin’s worst nightmare—a Soviet sellout as part of the general settlement with the West—had become a distinct possibility.

When the end came in 1989 and 1990, it came with a vengeance. Citizens in East Berlin and 14 other Bezirk (district) capitals, angry over reports of systemic file destruction, marched on Stasi headquarters. These groups all published memoirs, but the best one is *Stasi intern*, which was compiled by the

Leipzig citizens' committee. It explains Stasi surveillance, telephone monitoring, and mail censorship operations in great detail, and it includes pages of illuminating photos.

Bizarre Behavior

More than the other books, it gives insight into the Stasi mentality. The MfS, for example, developed a forensic theory that each person has a unique body odor. Stasi officers gained surreptitious entry to the homes of East German citizens and foreign diplomats to collect odor samples that were preserved in glass jars for later use with tracking dogs. The Leipzig group discovered that the Stasi had one jar for every member of the large local dissident community.

The Stasi patrolled public restrooms looking for political graffiti. They photographed it, measured it, analyzed it, and submitted official reports to the commanding general. The Stasi also had video coverage of selected public toilets and of virtually every bathroom and toilet in hotels and inns catering to foreign tourists. It also recruited restroom attendants to spy on tourists. Worst's book includes a long and extensive agent-vetting report on one such attendant who was recruited to spy on foreigners.

Few Files

Most HVA files disappeared. Some were destroyed, and others were sent to Moscow. HVA officers persuaded the activists that their files held vital state secrets that, if revealed, could "send American agents to the electric chair."

The only existing collection of HVA documents is the one Scitrenny and Weichert found in Leipzig. The HVA had its largest residency there to target the

many foreign tourists, students, and businessmen visiting East Germany's most cosmopolitan city. The book has some real nuggets. For example, the authors found a case officer's notebook with a list of all West German high-tech firms penetrated by HVA agents.

Some Assessments

Spymaster Markus Wolf and two of his former case officers, Peter Richter and Klaus Roelser, believe that the HVA was the world's best foreign intelligence service. Wolf brags that he made the West "transparent" and prevented NATO from launching a surprise attack on the Warsaw Pact. He claims, with some justification, that the HVA helped build the East Germany economy by procuring Western technology and equipment. Richter and Roesler assert that by the 1980s even the KGB acknowledged HVA prowess and gave it license to run offensive operations against the CIA.

But these claims lack perspective. The HVA was not a full-service intelligence organization running worldwide operations. It fought a primarily civil war on German territory, where it had the advantage of proximity, common language and culture, area knowledge, and multiple points of access to an open society.

Nevertheless, the MfS, like the KGB, was one of the best. Its feats with agents, agents of influence, active measures, and S&T collection already form part of the lore of Cold War intelligence history. Its accomplishments, however, merely helped to delay the day when communism finally went down history's drain.

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August 1990: Survivors of the raid on Vemork. Author Claus Helberg is seated at the far left.